

The Art of Keeping the People in Line: Lisa Wedeen's *Ambiguities of Domination* after 20 Years

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As I reflected on the insights and resonance of Lisa Wedeen's (1999) *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* at the 20th anniversary of its publication, my mind initially went to Etienne de la Boetie, not to James Scott (1990), as many might believe. In the late 1500s, de la Boetie (1576/1975) wrote *The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude* in which he wondered: "Why do people, in all times and places, obey the commands of the government, which always constitutes a small minority of the society?" Seemingly agitated, de la Boetie (1975, 46) pushed the point (imagine an animated Al Pacino in the role of de la Boetie):

I should like merely to understand how it happens that so many men (forgive the gendered labeling for this quote), so many villages, so many cities, so many nations, sometimes suffer under a single tyrant who has no other power than the power they gave him; who is able to harm them only to the extent to which they have the willingness to bear with him; who could do them absolutely no injury unless they preferred to put up with him rather than contradict him. Surely a striking situation! Yet it is so common that one must grieve the more and wonder the less at the spectacle of a million men serving in wretchedness, their necks under the yoke, not constrained by a greater multitude than they....

And, still further, he laments (de la Boetie 1576/1975, 48):

Shall we call subjection to such a leader cowardice?...If a hundred, if a thousand endure the caprice of a single man, should we not rather say that they lack not the courage but the desire to rise against him, and that such an attitude indicates indifference, rather than cowardice? When not a hundred, not a thousand men, but a hundred provinces, a thousand cities, a million men refuse to assail a single man from whom the kindest treatment received is the infliction of serfdom and slavery, what shall we call that? Is it cowardice?...When a thousand, a million men, a thousand cities, fail to protect themselves against the domination of one man, this cannot be called cowardly, for cowardice does not sink to such a depth. ...What monstrous vice, then, is this which does not even deserve to be called cowardice, a vice for which no term can be found vile enough...?

De la Boetie offered answers—several, actually. Acknowledging that such systems generally emerge from the barrel of a

gun, he argued that subsequent maintenance is driven by four processes. First, it is facilitated by force of habit and custom—that is, we do what our parents do and did. Second, it is facilitated by distraction (famously referred to as “bread and circuses”):

Plays, farces, spectacles, gladiators, strange beast, medals, pictures, and other such opiates, these were for ancient people the bait toward slavery, the price of their liberty, the instruments of tyranny. By these practices and enticements, the ancient dictators so successfully lulled their subjects under the yoke, that the stupefied peoples, fascinated with their pastimes and vain pleasures flashed before their eyes, learned subservience as naively, but not so creditably, as little children learn to read by looking at bright picture books (de la Boetie 1576/1975, 22).

Third, maintenance is facilitated by deceiving the masses into believing the merits of their leader. Fourth, it is facilitated by outright bribery—either the larger-scale version in which we might consider something like a welfare state or the smaller-scale version in which a praetorian guard, military, or administration is provided with a significant level of resources and status. With people “on the dole,” no one wants to lose their “meal ticket”; therefore, they not only collect their checks, but they also hold others at bay.

De la Boetie's answer to this problem is fairly straightforward: If leaders start acting up, then the people withdraw from them. Without (mass) complicity, the system erected would fall like a house of cards. This is a powerful argument and a very different take on the way that many argue that closed and exclusionary political systems are sustained, as well as the role that individuals play within that perpetuation. For example, compare this line of argument to Walter's *Terror and Resistance* (1969): it moves scholarship away from discussions of coercive and material mechanisms of power to think of something more effective, more insidious, as well as more common.

Of course, there are problems with de la Boetie's work—especially when applied to later nation-states. For example, a “single (person)” does not subjugate millions (apologies to rationalist assumptions). Rather, it is an untold number of individuals among the military; paramilitary; intelligence agencies; national guard; national, state, and local police; border patrol; prison officials; parole boards; private security forces; agents provocateur; and informants (a nation of

millions, as Public Enemy would say). It is easy to state (as many philosophers have noted) that to end a situation of slavery and subjugation, one simply should stop participating and the relevant institution or practice will go away. These processes do not simply go away, however—and, if they do, in all likelihood they are going away with many people dying enroute. There also is the Olsonian objection regarding collective-action problems: slavery and mass discriminatory patterns are not eliminated by a revolution or a rebellion of a single individual. People need to come together to confront the gendarmes being sent to crush them or to overcome those protecting the leader. Regardless of objections, the argument is an important one with wide implications for how we think, study, and talk about sustained, exclusionary, repressive, or nonresponsive political orders as well as how to get rid of them.

Enter *Ambiguities of Domination*. I have always seen Wedeen's (1999) work on the cult of Hafiz al-Asad as a response to de la Boetie and others who came in his wake (and generally without acknowledging his work and thought). In many ways, she expands and reinforces his argument but, in other ways, she significantly problematizes and moves beyond it.

For example, similar to de la Boetie, Wedeen views coercion and force as lying at the root of the Asad government—but

With each action, the actor:

[r]egisters not only [their] obedience, but also [their] complicity in perpetuating the cult. To be complicit is to allow oneself to be made an accomplice, to become bound up in the actions and practices the regime promotes (Wedeen 1999, 74).

It is interesting that this process introduces something that de la Boetie did not seem to highlight: the overindulgence in the cult as a means to survive as well as thrive in and of itself. It also reveals the diffusion of obedience:

By complying, each [individual] demonstrates the regime's power to dominate [them]. [Through observation, the individual] comes to know about [themselves], and about the others, that each can be made to subordinate to state authority not only [their] body, but also [their] imagination... (Wedeen 1999, 81).

We can see the complex scaffolding of Wedeen's argument coming into place: the lattice of human interaction moving upward and outward, rendering all under its structure trans-fixed as well as complicit.

Finally, similar to de la Boetie, Wedeen sees that circuses (less so bread) are used as a way to occupy and crowd out rational thinking and mobilization. For example, by compel-

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ling partially and not even predominantly. She acknowledges that someone could be shot, dragged away, and imprisoned (this is possible, although not as often as we might believe) but, as Wedeen (1999, 27) notes:

Incarceration and corporal punishment are never...the exclusive forms of control upon which regimes rely. Regimes depend not only on the capacity to eliminate would-be opponents but also on strategies that make such punishments unnecessary... [s]ymbolic displays of power not only operate in tandem with overt coercive controls, they are themselves a subsystem of coercive control.

Similar to de la Boetie, Wedeen views civilian complicity as a major reason why authoritarian rule is sustained. Civilians are not simply victims of or witnesses to their subjugation; they are (every-day) agents of the state regulatory/controlling project largely through their participation in state-sponsored rituals that requires people to utter specific things, display certain objects, and engage in specific gestures in specific times and places. As Wedeen (1999, 73) states poignantly:

[a]n in-depth analysis of the regime's rhetoric more generally suggests that people's language, and in some cases their imaginations, are being deployed every day to extol Asad's virtues, to construct ideas of community and sovereignty by devising the narratives and reiterating the formulas that frame the terms of state dominance and national belonging.

ling the engagement in cult-defined rituals, non-state-sponsored utterances, displays, and gestures are "killed."

This is about where the similarities dissolve. Different from de la Boetie, Wedeen sees opportunity in the forced ritualization of Asad's cult. Although the ability to use any words, gestures, and activities is hindered by the government, the ability to rearrange the meanings behind the permitted words, gestures, and activities remains to be assumed by a few brazen individuals. In a sense, repression provides a collective and available experience, an understanding, and (importantly) a vocabulary for all those in Syria that individuals are able to use and subvert. Wedeen reveals that many in the country do so repeatedly as well as creatively across a wide variety of domains. Imagine hundreds or thousands of Nas, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and James Baldwins being given a single text from which to sample, mix, and deconstruct in film, rap lyrics, plays, comic books, and graffiti. Here, given the image of an all-powerful father, civilians poke fun at fatherhood without naming names (of course). Given the image of modernity, civilians poke fun at the misuse of technology. Examples abound. To be sure, this is no revolution in the traditional sense and it is no Black Lives Matter protest of millions congregating in the open. It is, however, the stuff that allows individuals under the situation of subjugation to squeeze out a modicum of dignity and resistance. It is, as Scott (1990) reminds us, the stuff from which revolution and protest could be born. Consequently, the forms of everyday resistance are

not to be dismissed as irrelevant or underestimated in importance.

Different from de la Boetie, Wedeen maintains that rather than being revealed as strong, government is revealed to be a fragile and weak entity. Hers is not a Hobbesian tale of state

I have always been struck by this poem because it so well captures the situation of African Americans as well as those around them. The former has lived, breathed, thought, and acted without generally sharing their true feelings out of fear regarding what would happen if those from the “bottom of the

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efficiency and effectiveness in ridding the nation of all threats. Rather, Wedeen maintains that a largely crippled government—albeit armed and occasionally violent—generally creates a population of dissimulating haters who seemingly will take every opportunity to convey derision toward those in authority. This is very different from traditional repression literature in which coercion and force are viewed as strategies of strength and capability—meriting only fear and/or criticism. Here, Wedeen joins Arendt (1951) in seeing authoritarian government coercion and force for what it is—a weapon of the weakest, most vulnerable, and least capable type of political institution.

Different from de la Boetie, Wedeen does not see weakness in the position of those subjected to Asad's rule. She is not disgusted with them (as was de la Boetie) and seeking to understand their resignation to the life to which their leader has subjected them. Quite the contrary, Wedeen seems to be celebrating the diverse ways that those “under the gun” can excavate or carve out some sense of meaning and dignity. As an African American, I am of course sympathetic to her argument. In the spirit of cultural interpretivism, I think that the following poem by Paul Dunbar (1895) is appropriate:

well” spoke too openly. The latter (i.e., academics, public-opinion pollsters, focus-group facilitators, interviewers, and more-than-casual observers) have put forward numerous efforts to discern what Blacks thought, felt, and experienced. Dunbar tells them and us, however, that these efforts will always fall short. Someone from the outside—and occasionally from the inside—could never truly fathom what lay beneath the mask at the bottom of the well.

Similarly, Wedeen calls for us to never accept that what is seen within an authoritarian system (or a democratic one, for that matter) is all that there is. Within her book is a triumphant acknowledgment of dignity and resistance making (perhaps more individual than collective in orientation) despite subjugation. Accordingly, we are invited and guided to see a thousand dignified and resistant creations emerge.

Of course, the celebratory acknowledgment is complex. Despite stories, jokes, cartoons, graffiti, and films, the dictator still dictated, hoarded, killed, imprisoned, and reigned in a position of relative privilege—if not power. This is a difficult point for the type of resistance being referenced here to address. Some call for a connection between these every-day

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We Wear the Mask

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask!

quotidian efforts and some “real” change (sarcasm and snark generally intended). However, I see no reason to “kill the party” (so to speak, and forgive the word choice). Who am I to say that dignity amid a horribly repressive and oppressive situation is not a way through and beyond that situation? “Black” humor was long viewed as one of the saving graces of African American sanity and survival, along with music. As we awaited the outcome of the election in the United States, I know many of us were looking to Richard Pryor, Chris Rock, and “Chappelle's Show” to get us through. New research shows that this type of activity may be the key to living to fight another day (e.g., Mekawi et al. 2021).

Here, I want to underline what I view as a major strength of Wedeen's book and a general limitation with the broader fields of political science and sociology: the community of scholars has largely not taken up the charge of more rigorously

exploring compliance, complicity, and cults in support of inequitable power relations. In this sense, 20 years after the fact, we very much need *Ambiguities of Domination*. Comparatively, we have much more work on overt manifestations of rebellion, insurgency, terrorism, and protest, as well as state repression. Although these manifestations of power attempts are definitely important and, frankly, easier to study in many ways, all that we see here is not all that there is. We need to have a systematic evaluation of the various ways that boundaries actually are established or attempted by those within political-economic power (what I call boundarization studies), as well as the various ways that these boundaries and boundary attempts actually are transgressed or attempted (what I call transgression studies). This likely will change as scholars reflect on the Trump administration, but this point bears mentioning. I have not resorted to the standard categorical labels of “domination” and “resistance,” contentious politics, and conflict studies and processes because they all introduce problems. The literature’s inability to address this broader conceptualization of boundarization is impeding our ability to understand the onset, escalation, duration, de-escalation, termination, recurrence, and outcomes of every single form of contention on which we generally focus. At present, I am not optimistic about our ability to overcome this limitation because we see increasingly greater efforts being exerted to

explore increasingly narrower forms of contention in specific times and places. That said, any reader of Wedeen’s *Ambiguities of Domination* will immediately be set back correctly on the path of the larger agenda for unifying the various forms of boundarization and transgression. ■

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